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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CAIRO 007142

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SUBJECT: STRAINS IN EGYPT-IRAQ RELATIONS DELAY TALABANI
VISIT

Classified by Ambassador Francis Ricciardone for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Iraq's Minister for Water Resources, Abdel Latif Rachid, told the Ambassador on December 10 that Iraqi President Jalal Talabani postponed an expected visit to Egypt over Iraqi perceptions that Egypt did not treat the visit with sufficient protocolary importance. FM Aboul Gheit separately commented on the affair, extremely unhappily. The episode is a symptom of the stagnant and emotion-laden bilateral relationship between Baghdad and Cairo. End summary.

¶2. (C) Iraqi Minister for Water Resources, Abdel Latif Rachid, met with the Ambassador on December 10 and discussed Egyptian-Iraqi relations, among other topics. Rachid, a long-time acquaintance of the Ambassador, was in Cairo to attend a meeting of the Arab Council of Water Ministers. Rachid offered a bleak assessment of the security situation in Baghdad, describing the "insanity" of Takfiri violence in the Iraqi capital, directed toward bakers, hairdressers, teachers, and "anyone with an education." Despite the resulting exodus of professionals from Baghdad, Rachid described Iraqi Kurdistan - Rachid's home - as a relative success story due to security and economic growth.

¶3. (C) Asked about interactions with his Egyptian hosts, Rachid complained that comments made at a dinner attended by Minister for International Cooperation Fayza Aboul Naga and other Egyptian ministers revealed profound ignorance of the situation inside Iraq, with some asking whether the U.S. controlled Iraq's finances and directed its ministers. Their questions, he said, were "insulting: they don't want to understand" what is going on there, he complained. In an attempt to better inform the Egyptians about Iraq, Rachid said he was interviewed that day on a popular Egyptian television show. Despite the violence around Baghdad, he explained, salaries for government professionals had increased to realistic levels, and hundreds of real development projects under his ministry were progressing. There is far less corruption and mismanagement and far more freedom of speech and thought in Iraq, he added, than in any other Arab country.

¶4. (C) Turning to the expected visit to Egypt by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, Rachid said he was not sure if the visit (originally planned, he said, for December 11) would happen, since Egypt was "taking it (the visit) very casually." The Egyptians, he noted, said Talabani would be received by Mubarak, but did not offer a program or formal plan. Talabani, therefore, did not want to commit to a visit before a program was made clear. (FM Aboul Gheit confirmed to Ambassador on December 12 that the Iraqis had canceled the visit on short notice, after EGIS and Mubarak had made time to receive Talabani. See septel).

¶5. (C) The Ambassador explained that the Egyptian behavior

was not unusual, in that senior USG visitors also do not receive confirmation of a Mubarak meeting until immediately beforehand. But, he noted, DCI Negroponte and the Ambassador recently met with Mubarak and asked whether a visit by Iraqi PM Maliki was welcome. Mubarak had said that Maliki was "welcome at any time." Responding to Negroponte's follow-up query whether Mubarak might extend a more formal invitation directly to the Iraqi PM, Mubarak stated "that's not the way we do business." Rachid explained that the Egyptian attitude on the issue of visits came across as insincere - i.e., "sure, come over any time for a drink." Absent a formal agenda and program, he said, it would be hard for Talabani to visit. The Ambassador reminded Rachid of the very successful and productive November 2005 visit to Cairo of Iraqi National Security Advisor Muwaffaq al Rubaie. That visit began with only one confirmed meeting with Egyptian Intelligence Chief Soliman, but blossomed into an in-depth tour that included meetings with Mubarak, the Sheikh of Al Azhar, and many senior GOE officials, as well as extensive and positive press coverage in the pro-government media.

¶6. (C) Moving on to the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group report, Rachid complained that the report insulted Iraqi sovereignty, since - for example - it talked of the Iraqi Constitution as though it could be easily amended. Rachid cautioned Washington not to focus too heavily on talks with Iran and Syria, since "no Iraqi wants a role for either of them in Iraq." Turkey, on the other hand, was playing a positive role with Iraq, while other Iraqi neighbors were of less consequence.

¶7. (C) Comment: While it has extended more diplomatic support toward the GOI than other Arab states have done, ignorance and prejudice color GOE thinking on Iraq. Its

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protocollary nonchalance on senior visits, though, is the way they do business with everyone, reflecting the peculiar arrogance of a state hyper-conscious of its glorious past and modern decline. The best way to punch through Egyptian and broader Sunni Arab ignorance of Iraqi current affairs, however, is for GOI leaders to engage face-to-face with Mubarak and his cabinet. As evident in the visit of Talabani and then-PM Jaafari in November 2005, once in Cairo, they will have ample, dignified access not only to the top reaches of the GOE and a showy Arab League podium, but also to Egyptian and Arab broadcast and print media.

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